
The Conspiracy Theory of Management: Implementing Strategy from the Top Down



By [Chris Outram](#) , Founder, OC&C Strategy Consultants

Nurturing a coterie of 'true believers' and expunging the confirmed 'doubters' is key to strategic success.

Developing good strategy can involve a lot of hard work but it's of little use to anyone if execution fails. As I mentioned in a [previous post](#), the first stumbling block that good strategies often take is when the team around you does not understand it, agree with it or is incapable of implementing it. Good people, top level performers, can enhance a strategy's likelihood of success but all too often implementation breaks down because of the people involved. Strong leadership and decisive use of human resources is key to solving this 'People Puzzle', and building a bridge for the successful execution of the most robust strategy.

To implement strategy single-mindedly, the CEO is best served by working closely with a small coterie of devout 'believers'. These believers (The Conspirators), a tight bond of no more than three or four trusted colleagues selected from within the immediate executive team, form what I refer to as

the ‘conspiracy theory of management’.

This inner circle must adhere to a number of principles. First, they must understand and believe in the strategy as strongly as the CEO does, and behave in line with it. They must be absolutely loyal to the CEO and the company and finally, they must be willing to explain the strategy, and its implications, to any doubters within the organisation. They must be able to deputise for the CEO in terms of explaining the strategy and its consequences and required behaviours at times when the CEO is not in the room!

Fostering a sense of trust and joint endeavour within this small group is instrumental to success. These select individuals should be able to challenge and question the CEO while conspiring behind closed doors, precisely because the CEO trusts them and needs that sort of constructive challenge.

Clarity is essential for the successful implementation of strategy. If a CEO fails to set out clear objectives for his or her inner circle to pass down through the organisation, mediocre strategy implementation will be the inevitable result. True believers need to feel they fully understand the strategy and recognise that they are responsible for implementing it.

The CEO then has to look at the doubters and make a decision on whether he feels they can be “turned”. There is no room in any organisation for confirmed doubters. Their cynical attitude towards a strategy can spread and become toxic, making execution more difficult and expensive. The doubter can also be a bad role model for his or her juniors, radiating scepticism throughout the company. They may be good and effective employees, but if they’re getting in the way of strategy implementation, it is critical they be moved to less integral roles. In more extreme cases, a CEO may find it necessary to manage a few high-profile dismissals.

A successful “conspiracy” requires more than loyalty. Having the right people in place at all levels is critical. A mediocre team can run the best strategy aground or deliver sub-optimal results at best. Companies should first hire the best people possible and then proceed to educate and motivate them.

Many of the CEOs I interviewed pointed out that attracting top level performers at all ranks of management massively increases the likelihood of success. Indeed, many insisted that over-investing in people, led to both superior commitment and superior strategic performance.

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